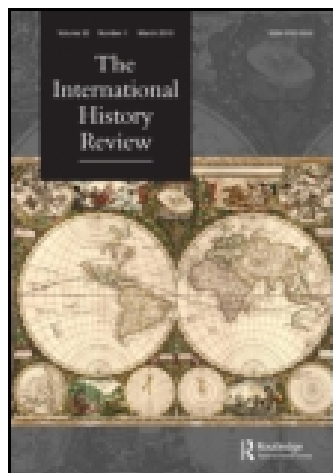


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Wellington and the Marathas in 1803

ARTHUR WELLESLEY'S FIRST opportunity of independent command came in India, to which he went out a lieutenant-colonel in 1797, returning in 1805 a major-general with a knighthood. While there, he fought two of his most fiercely contested battles, against the troops of Daulat Rao Sindhia and the raja of Berar in the Second Maratha War. The performance of the Marathas at the battles of Assaye on 23 September 1803 and Argaum on 28 November attests to the high level of their infantry and especially artillery capability. The victory of the British shows how far this capability was nullified by the lack of an effective officer corps.

* * *

As accounts of the battles in the Second Maratha War filtered through English society, a change in current could be detected. Gone were the tales of easy victory over myriads of noble brown savages with sword in hand. Among the most articulate of the returning veterans was Major William Thorn who sought to convince his readers that:

Hitherto the most incorrect notions have prevailed in this country respecting Indian warfare; in consequence of which misconceptions, the hardest battles have been undervalued, and the most splendid victories have been thrown into shade. Thus the services of our armies in that region suffer in the general estimation, and the exemplary conduct of individuals loses its reward, owing to the distance of the scene, and the comparatively little interest which it occupies in the public mind. The mass of the people are also uninformed in regard to the changes that have taken place among the warlike tribes of India, through the introduction of European tactics and French discipline; which, combined with their natural courage, often

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bordering on frenzy, and their numerical superiority, has rendered our conflicts with them sanguinary in the extreme . . . their infantry stood till the English bayonets touched their breasts; the artillery men, with similar firmness, served their guns without receding an inch; and when they could no longer fire, they made use of their tollwars, till they fell under the carriage wheels of their cannon; while the cavalry, in the same spirit, charged up to the very muzzles of our firelocks.¹

Maratha battlefield sophistication resulted from centuries of rivalry when regional warlords competed for manpower, weaponry, and the military advantage embodied in new tactics and strategy. The western coastal location of Maharashtra had provided access to international military science, leading to a military tradition of infantry-prédominant as opposed to mounted armies;² a parallel evolution with much of north-western Europe, the standard by which we have judged the military development of others. Thus, although a number of western military historians have assumed that the Marathas were latecomers to the style of infantry-dominated warfare of eighteenth-century Europe,³ formations like the Spanish Square had in fact been acquired from the Portuguese several generations earlier, being modified to indigenous and environmental requirements and to take advantage of technology as it became available.

It is curious that the Europeans who arrived in India in the late eighteenth century had no understanding of the Maratha infantry tradition, which had been institutionalized along with artillery under Shivaji in the seventeenth century and honed to perfection by Baji Rao I. During 1761, however, the Marathas had suffered a devastating blow to their indigenous officer corps, when a great number of the officers commanding the Maratha clan armies were killed at the battle of Panipat in an attempt to roll back the Afghan invasion of Ahmed Shah Durani. The void in clan ranks coupled with financial constraints led to

¹ Major William Thorn, *Memoir of the War in India Conducted by General Lord Lake, Commander-in-Chief, and Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington; From its Commencement in 1803, to its Termination in 1806, On The Banks of The Hyphasis* (London, 1818), p. ix.

² This is evident in Maratha history and it was so vital that a number of instructions on the importance of infantry were issued. By the time of the *Ajnapatra* (Handbook of Maratha Statecraft 1715-1716, P.N. Goshi, Poona, 1960), there were specific recommendations for the deployment of musket battalions.

³ See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 129; B.P. Lenman, 'The Weapons of War in Eighteenth Century India', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, xlv (1968), 33-43; S.N. Sen, *The Military System of the Marathas* (Calcutta, 1928). See also John Pemble, 'Resources and Techniques in the Second Maratha War', *Historical Journal*, xix (1976), 375-404. The best account of the military culture of India will be found in D.H.A. Kolff, 'An Armed Peasantry and its Allies' (Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden, 1983).

such a resurgence of the irregular mounted Pindari warrior that many of the clan armies of the third quarter of the eighteenth century were perceived to be purely Pindari, lacking any regular units.⁴ Thus, if the Savoyard soldier of fortune, Count Benoit de Boigne, may be credited with re-invigorating the Maratha artillery and infantry two decades prior to the Second Maratha War, his effort must be seen as a revival rather than as an innovation.

Wellesley, like many others, believed the traditional Maratha army to have been composed solely of Pindari horse. Disciplined infantry battalions he thought to be a recent and unsuccessful experiment: the Marathas were better off with an all-cavalry force. 'I think it is much to be doubted whether his [Sindhia's] power, or that of the Maratha nation, would not have been more formidable, at least to the British Government, if they had never had a European, as an infantry soldier in their service; and had carried on their operations, in the manner of the original Marathas, only by means of cavalry.'⁵

There were, however, individuals who had recognized the true potential of the Maratha army. The British resident at Sindhia's court, Colonel Collins (often jokingly referred to as King Collins because of his eccentric dress), did try to warn Wellesley. Following a meeting to discuss the state of the Maratha army, between Wellesley, several of his officers including John Blakiston of the Engineers, and Collins, on 29 August 1803, Blakiston heard Collins say to Wellesley: 'I tell you, General, as to their cavalry (meaning the enemy's), you may ride over them wherever you meet them; but their infantry and guns will astonish you. As, in riding home afterwards we amused ourselves, the General among the rest, in cutting jokes at the expense of "little King Collins", we little thought how true his words would prove.'⁶

A year later Wellesley had learned better. As he explained Maratha tactics:

⁴ The Pindaris were irregular horse who derived most of their pay from plunder. For details see M.P. Roy, *Origin, Growth and Suppression of the Pindaris* (New Delhi, 1973).

⁵ Wellesley to Shawe, 18 Nov. 1803, *The Despatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington*, ed. Lt.-Col. Gurwood (13 vols., London, 1834-9), ii. 517 [hereafter *WD*]. Wellesley's opinions were probably formed during his campaign against the Maratha Pindari leader, Dhoondia Vagh, in 1800. See W.H. Springer, 'The Military Apprenticeship of Arthur Wellesley in India, 1797-1805' (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1966), p. 92.

⁶ John Blakiston, *Twelve Years' Military Adventure in Three Quarters of the Globe: Or Memoirs of an Officer who served in the Armies of His Majesty and of the East India Company, between the years 1802 and 1814, in which are contained the Campaigns of the Duke of Wellington in India, and his last in Spain and the South of France* (2 vols., London, 1829) i. 145.

There are two modes in which the Mahrattas carry on their operations. They operate upon supplies by means of their cavalry; and after they have created a distress in the enemy's camp, which obliges the army to commence a retreat, they press upon it with all their infantry and their powerful artillery. Their opponent, being pressed for provisions, is obliged to hurry his march, and they have no fear of being attacked. They follow him with their cavalry in his marches, and surround and attack him with their infantry and cannon when he halts, and he can scarcely escape from them. . . .

You must by all means avoid allowing him to attack you with his infantry. There is no position in which you could maintain your camp against such powerful artillery as all the Mahrattas have. If you should not hear of their approach until they are close to you and coming to attack you, it would be better to secure your baggage in any manner, and move out to attack them. Do not allow them to attack you in your camp, on any account.⁷

The memoirs of the British officers who witnessed the Maratha artillery in action leave no doubt about its level of sophistication. At the time of the Second Maratha War, France was considered to have the finest artillery in the world. When British officers saw the volume of fire produced by the Maratha guns, some asserted incorrectly that they were manned by Frenchmen but all agreed the effect was devastating. Another false assumption was that Frenchmen were responsible for the production of artillery and its accoutrements in India, when in fact the French merely provided the most modern example to be copied.⁸

Wellesley gained his first introduction to the power of Maratha artillery at the battle of Assaye in a predicament which dictated the need for its immediate neutralization. While stalking the Marathas, he had wandered too close to the Maratha force commanded by the Hessian mercenary Pohlman. At that point he had two choices—either to attempt a retreat, which the Marathas with their large body of horse were capable of cutting off, or to risk a surprise attack and hope to overcome the enormous odds. Having chosen the latter course, Wellesley was compelled immediately to try to eliminate the Maratha artillery, but he could not afford a set-piece battle lest he be overwhelmed by the Marathas' fire superiority, and their superiority in numbers of apparently ten to one.

Wellesley's artillery opened fire at 400 yards with little effect other than to arouse the Maratha gunners, whose own opening salvo found its range, killing British gun crews and draught animals alike.⁹ As the

⁷ Wellesley to Murray, 14 Sept. 1804, *WD*, iii. 464.

⁸ Thorn, *Memoir*, pp. 117-18, 279.

⁹ Blakiston, *Military Adventure*, i. 163, 173-4.

British guns, still attached to the animals, could not easily be moved or fired, Wellesley had to abandon them, along with the hope of winning an artillery duel. Instead, an infantry assault was launched, as the only way to bring suitable British fire to bear on the enemy.

A contemporary Marathi source – which corroborates Wellesley's account of the initial attack at 400 yards – indicates that the Maratha army was not fully deployed in camp formation when he attacked:¹⁰ the bullocks were out to grass; fewer than ninety guns were prepared for service; and the long-range field artillery was still limbered. Thus, up to one-third of the Marathas' firepower (30 to 40 of their later-estimated 120 pieces) was out of action, even though intelligence reports had warned of the British presence earlier in the day. It seems the Maratha high command had assumed that the British would not attack with such small numbers.

A post-combat analysis by Blakiston of Maratha batteries at Assaye proved that the Marathas knew the theory as well as the practice of contemporary gunnery: their weapons had been 'laid', according to textbook standards, at an elevation slightly below zero degrees to produce level fire at close range.¹¹ Captured Maratha ammunition was found to conform to French standards, which differed from the British in offering two sizes of grapeshot. Maratha gunners were thus able to combine their ammunition to extend their range: small grapeshot from a cannon firing at relatively level elevation was useful against columns of troops at 200 metres, whereas the same effect might be achieved at 600 metres with larger grape in a piece whose barrel had been adjusted for a corresponding point of impact.

Blakiston's observations concerning the heat of battle at Assaye indicate the devastating power of the Maratha artillery and the futility of having marched into its path:

At this time the fire of the enemy's artillery became, indeed, most dreadful. In the space of less than a mile, 100 guns, worked with skill and rapidity, vomited forth death into our feeble ranks. It cannot, then, be a matter of surprise if, in many cases, the sepoy's should have taken advantage of any irregularities in the ground to shelter themselves from the deadly shower, or that even, in some few instances, not all the endeavours of the officers could persuade them to move forward.¹²

Despite the horrendous casualty figures, linear tactics persisted in emphasizing the steady advance of troops, heads held high, particularly

¹⁰ V.Y. Khare, *Aitihasik Lekha Sangraha*, xiv. 3 Nov. 1803, p. 7908.

¹¹ Blakiston, *Military Adventure*, i. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

Europeans, who were expected to take no cover against enemy fire. Blakiston observed, however, that sepoys sometimes dropped to the ground or used their knapsacks as shields, a divergence from the western notion of 'manly behaviour'. Wellesley, observing them, later profited by it.¹³ Blakiston's first intimation of Wellesley's genius came when he saw Wellesley at Argaum restore order by commanding his men to lie down, at one stroke reducing their target profile and their ability to run away. Wellesley was quite pleased with himself, remarking to Blakiston, 'Did you ever see a battle restored like this?'¹⁴

Many of the sepoys who had survived the short-range artillery fire at Assaye broke and ran when subjected two months later to unexpected long-range fire at Argaum. Some authors believe the Marathas had preregistered their guns, and veterans of Assaye had a fairly shrewd idea of their chances. In any case, their fears were exacerbated when drivers of the bullock-drawn artillery leading the first British column lost control of their animals under fire. The bullocks turned back through the ranks, inflicting heavy casualties, and this, combined with the cannonade, caused two battalions of sepoys to run for shelter to a nearby village. It was then that Wellesley ordered them to lie down.

Maratha artillery was more advanced than British on several counts.¹⁵ Wellesley himself conceded there was no comparison in the quality of design and manufacture,¹⁶ and as we have seen, it featured greater technical innovation and a more advanced method of application. There was also an integrated deployment, which grouped weapons in a manner not found among the British, whose artillery was dominated by six and twelve pounders, with heavier eighteen and twenty-four pounders available as required for siege duty. The Maratha artillery corps, in contrast, carried a much greater variety of guns into the field, often up to thirty-six pounders. Despite the heavy weight, the effort was justified on more than one occasion when they were used for their long range or sheer kinetic energy.

NATO commanders today place great importance on what they call C³I, which is to say, command, control, communication, and intelligence. Measured in these terms, the Marathas, as encountered by Wellesley, had suffered massive damage to an already unstable command and control capability, even though Wellesley's troops, unit by unit,

¹³ Wellesley to Shawe, 2 Dec. 1803, *WD*, ii. 561.

¹⁴ Blakiston, *Military Adventure*, i. 200-2. See also Springer, 'Apprenticeship of Wellesley', p. 152.

¹⁵ See Wellesley to St. Leger, 11 April 1799, *The Supplementary Despatches and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington*, ed. 2d duke of Wellington (15 vols., London, 1858-72), i. 1 [hereafter *WSD*].

¹⁶ Wellesley to Malcolm, 26 Sept. 1803, *WSD*, iv. 180.

cannot be shown to have exhibited any significant margin of superiority in either physical strength or training. 'Their infantry is the best I have ever seen in India, excepting our own,' commented Wellesley after Assaye; 'and they and their equipments far surpass Tippoo's. I assure you that their fire was so heavy, that I much doubted at one time whether I should be able to prevail upon our troops to advance.'¹⁷

The Maratha command structure was in shambles,¹⁸ however, partly owing to the long-standing British strategy of stripping the Maratha army of its officer corps. It was a strategy authorized at the highest level, long before the offer of transfer into the Indian Army proffered by the governor-general, Wellesley's older brother, Richard, on 29 August 1803.¹⁹ Though some British mercenaries left the Maratha army simply to avoid fighting against their countrymen, many more were enticed by the offer of positions in the British Indian Army. As Maratha mercenary commanders were predominantly British, the Marathas would lose their reservoir of replacements.²⁰ There was also a plan to lure away Pindari units, which would reduce Maratha numbers and at the same time augment the native cavalry of the Indian Army. Ironically, the depletion of his officer corps was aggravated by Sindhia himself. Deserted by so many of his officers, he developed a suspicion that the rest might change sides in battle, and take their troops with them. Only days before

¹⁷ Wellesley to Malcolm, 28 Sept. 1803, *WD*, ii. 354. See also Springer, 'Apprenticeship of Wellesley', p. 141. In reference to Assaye, Springer noted that 'an interesting tactical point comes out of the battle. Wellesley's troops beat the Marathas with steel – bayonets and sabers – not firepower. The reverse is true of the considerable damage inflicted by the enemy. Thus the battle would appear to be an exception to the general run of nineteenth-century colonial wars. For the Highlanders, though, the use of steel rather than powder was no exception; it was tradition.'

¹⁸ The Maratha command was shaken to its core by events which happened on the eve of war. 'Perron, like his great predecessor De Boigne, was well known by the Maratha leaders to be opposed to war with the British; and this knowledge, as soon as war became inevitable, rendered his position impossible. He was no longer trusted by Sindhia, and the fact was well known to the officers, and indeed to the whole army, which he had formerly held completely under his control.' Colonel Hugh Pearse, *Memoir of the Life and Military Services of Viscount Lake, Baron of Delhi and Laswaree 1744-1808* (London, 1908), p. 184. Pearse (p. 186) felt that the intrigues among the mercenary officers must have shaken Maratha morale.

¹⁹ See Marquis Wellesley to Wellesley, 27 June 1803, *The Despatches, Minutes, and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley, K.G., during his Administration in India*, ed. Montgomery Martin (5 vols., London, 1837), iii. 156.

²⁰ It is not always easy to detect the western mercenaries among the lists of enemy officers. A number of British and European mercenaries were known by local names: Burandee Saheb was Major Brownrigg, Sutluj Saheb was Major Sutherland. See the memoirs of Pindari leader Amir Khan, translated and edited by Buswan Lal as *Mohummud Ameer Khan's The Memoirs of the Puthan Soldier of Fortune* (Calcutta, 1832) pp. 139-40.

Assaye, he ordered a number of his European officers rounded up and isolated some twelve miles away.²¹

The problem of a hollow command structure was compounded by the problem of control. The commitment of native troops to the British Indian Army rested on wages. Indian armies throughout the medieval and early modern period were notorious for their disobedience because of arrears in pay, in some cases their perennial lot. Similarly, the loyalty of the sepoy to the British empire had nothing to do with ideals or altruism, but everything to do with the regularity of his pay. As Great Britain controlled the sea lanes, it was possible for the British to give equal priority to wages as to ammunition,²² whereas the unpaid Maratha army that faced Wellesley at Assaye was deprived, not only of command, but also of control. Not having been paid regularly, the troops felt little contractual obligation to the unseasoned officers filling the leadership ranks left vacant by the desertion of their former commanders. Not only had these new officers had too little time to develop the requisite unit loyalty, but also they were too few to rally the troops in moments of crisis.

The professionalism of the new-style battalions which had been sustained during the war between Sindhia and Holkar in 1802, was on its way to disintegration by 1803. By the time of the Third Maratha War of 1817-19, the Marathas had abandoned their military modernity and resorted to cheaper irregular warfare. The absence of disciplined battalions and the revival of Pindari hordes dictated brutal counter-insurgency, such as the governor-general's order summarily to execute the Pindari leaders.

The fatal flaws embodied in the Maratha command structure show the problems associated with the absence of institutionalized officer training at the vital staff level. The Marathas achieved a level of technical sophistication at the expense of a modern command structure. As craftsmen and technicians, they had been able to duplicate the latest foreign military technology, but as would-be nation builders, they could not master the delicate machinery of command or compensate for the deficiencies in their general staff system. Nor was it possible for the fractured warlord Maratha state to unite. Politics undid what technology had achieved.

²¹ Khare, *Aitihasik Lekha Sangraha*, xiv. 19 Sept. 1803, p. 738a.

²² Thorn, *Memoir*, pp. 101, 117, 222.